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ABSTRACT

A most crucial factor to be considered in any curriculum development effort is that the impact of the content, method, and materials of instruction can be almost completely nullified by teacher attitude and implementation procedures. Investment in instructional materials must be supported by a counterpart investment in teaching teachers how to use these materials. The National Institute of Education should support programs that emphasize curriculum development in areas of content, instructional methods, instructional materials, and teacher utilization of materials. (DS)

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COMMENTS, CONCERNS AND CONVICTIONS ABOUT CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

During the past several years I have been very much impressed with the enthusiasm and desire of many teachers to make modifications of their approach to helping students learn. On a recent Chautauqua tour all workshops on individualizing instruction were over subscribed, and all directors indicated that they could have filled at least two such programs had the facilities and the time been available. In one case an extra session was set up which required teachers to give up their Saturday and Sunday to participate in a workshop on improvement of their own ability to teach. It is my impression that the development of instructional materials and the research in new approaches to learning are well ahead of the ability of teachers to utilize these materials and ideas in the classroom. It is important that research and development continue at a very high level; however, the great need for improvement in education now lies in the area of assisting practicing teachers to acquire available materials and to help them learn how to use these in their particular situations. Funding agencies should assist in maintaining advances in curriculum design but the major funding should be to assist teachers more directly.

COMMENTS, CONCERNS AND CONVICTIONS ABOUT CURRICULUM

by S.N. Postlethwait

Curriculum is the content, methods, and materials of instruction. But it is not the teachers or the students or the time schedule or the physical space. This quotation from NIE Curriculum Policy Discussion Number 3 excludes from curriculum development the most important single component of an instructional system which is the teacher. While the focus of any learning system must be the students and their progress, the one factor which will have greatest influence on the outcome of the instructional program will always be the teacher. The impact of the content, method and materials of instruction can be almost completely nullified by the attitude and implementation procedures controlled by the teacher on location. It has been my observation that materials, which have been produced by the very best intellect within a discipline coupled with clever instructional designers, become almost completely impotent in the hands of an inept and unenthusiastic teacher. Critical components of a carefully integrated instructional program can be left out or reorganized so that few if any students profit by the expertise with which the program was designed, and, not only is achievement not realized, but the students' attitudes toward the subject become more negative because of the

instruction. The students frequently are worse off with a carefully designed set of instructional materials than with materials that are less interdependent. Often a teacher with a few scornful words or other inappropriate communication can destroy the impact of the very best of materials. This in no way suggests that it is futile to produce good instructional materials, but rather it is to say that the production of good instructional materials alone will not improve instruction in the classroom. Tradition has taught teachers to look upon themselves as creative individuals who, given adequate money and time, can design a better instructional system than any that is presently available. In cases where these teachers do, indeed, receive funds and time, it is often true that the product not only is not better than that which is already available, but many times falls far short of materials produced by specialists.

During the past seven or eight years, I have had the occasion to work with several instructors on the production of materials for many minicourses and have observed an almost universal reaction to any previously produced materials. This reaction is always, "If you want me to work on this particular content, it is best that I start over again and discard that which has been produced by my predecessor. His materials are too

poorly done for me to even consider revision of them." This person then given an opportunity to start from the beginning produces new materials which his successor will treat in the very same pattern. I don't say this to suggest "futility in production of materials," but rather to indicate something of the nature of the problem as I have observed it. Obviously, it is not true that the new individual has some special capacity for developing instructional materials that his predecessor did not have. It is strictly the image that most teachers have of themselves.

If I am right about the central issue of improvement of instruction being improvement of teachers themselves, it follows that curriculum development is only a partial answer and that investments in producing instructional materials must be supported by a counterpart investment in teaching teachers how to use these materials. My impression is that a much higher percentage of teachers today are anxious and willing to improve their teaching skills and want very much to participate in programs to this end.

Many teachers are particularly frustrated by administrative and facilities limitations that will not permit the implementation of that which they know and have learned how to do. Discussion Guide Number 9 refers to this problem and my reaction is that a

considerable amount of funds should be allotted to helping schools use that which has already been produced. A great deal of excellent products have been produced at public expense and many of these have limited dissemination because of the lack of publicity and the difficulty in obtaining these materials through commercial companies. Further investment in producing more materials or reinventing the wheel will not insure any greater use of these materials or improvement of instruction. NIE should take an active role in promoting, not only materials produced by their funding, but the dissemination of information about and utilization of materials that have been produced from a variety of sources. If teachers could have easy access to non-copyrighted materials so that they could adapt these materials to their own local situation, it would provide them an opportunity to participate in the design of their own curriculum and improve the teachers' attitude concerning their utilization.

These materials can provide models for teachers to develop their own instructional programs if local fundings permit, and their own initiative and creativity will not be stifled. I'm convinced that support for publication of materials and their utilization along with teacher training are issues of high priority. During the past several years I have held many workshops

on faculty development, and it has been a common occurrence to find teachers excited and enthusiastic about improving their instruction but totally frustrated because of the lack of facilities and sources of assistance in developing a program at their local institution. Research to improve the practice of teaching is important; however, research and understanding of teaching methods are far ahead of implementation. Most of us know much more about how to teach and what we should be doing as teachers than we can possibly do under the circumstances. Models of functioning instructional systems should be supported for visitation by teachers who aspire to employ a similar instructional strategy.

Teachers who can withstand the frustrations and difficulties imposed by administration, facilities and tradition are few and far between. These individuals should be identified (based on their past record of aggressiveness and capacity to innovate) and encouraged by liberal funding to procure creative teaching programs. Outstanding researchers in science are frequently given career awards, professorships and other recognition and support so they can freely continue their creative activities. Few, if any, comparable awards are available for practicing teachers. These teachers should be individuals who can make things work that the

average teacher will not have the persistence or desire to accomplish. There are not many such individuals around in the United States, but the half a dozen or so are usually in freshman courses much overloaded with academic responsibilities. I suggest these individuals be supported because of their contribution to instructional design rather than because of specific research projects proposed.

Basic research by educational psychologists on how education occurs should be supported to a limited degree. There are many high quality research-based products already available, and there is a need to develop and support individuals who can design exemplary programs for utilization of these products.

I think NIE should conduct more than curriculum development as defined in Discussion Guide Number 3. Substance of content, instructional methods, and instructional materials all are of consequence, and one is not effective without the other. Some support should go to each of these areas, but not special attention to one and exclusion of the other. Teacher training in better methods will occur through having more courses utilizing excellent curriculum materials and instructional procedures.

I don't think NIE can do much about changing scheduling procedures and designing school facilities.

These will always be in the hands of the local administration, and NIE could have minimal impact at best. Again, support of individuals who develop model courses at a given institution will probably have more impact on the institution's curriculum than any generalized facilities designed by experts and transmitted to the architects. NIE cannot solve all curricular problems, but it is important that curriculum design in the 1990's and 2000 be supported. Some such instructional designs may be ahead of their time in 1976 but should be explored so that education for the future is not a chance phenomenon. Several alternative systems with the advantages and disadvantages should be explored long before the need for implementation is necessary. This is especially true in view of the changes in the nature of students now going to school and the need for education throughout one's lifetime. Imaginative models designed to take care of handicapped through adult education levels should be supported without the expectation that they will necessarily revolutionize instructional procedures within the next few years. In fact, if they merely reveal some procedures that are not appropriate, this would be helpful. The diversity of student populations and the accommodation of a greater variety of student needs certainly is an area worthy of NIE's concern.

Who should take the leadership or initiative in curriculum improvement? It is my impression that leadership should not be confined to some particular group or individual. Any group or individual who has special talents, capacities and interests to improve education should be encouraged. I would emphasize again the desirability of encouraging people who have a good track record by seeking them out for special considerations and awards. NIE should not consider itself as a dictator of the nature or directions of education. I am convinced that it should serve the educational community in supporting other individuals who do the work of education improvement. I think that it is unlikely that the commissioning of special papers will improve instruction. Polls for sampling opinions and ideas about curriculum design are better left to individuals or special groups who are interested in some special aspect of instructional design. NIE should not become involved in this kind of activity.

The primary function that NIE can serve in developing new curriculum is to stimulate others to get the job done. Most truly creative programs that have functioned well are those that are developed in an academic setting. New models or approaches that are developed disassociated with ongoing instructional situations frequently are a disaster. I would highly

recommend that NIE support programs that create new approaches, offer training and technical assistance, and develop new curricula, but not attempt to design these themselves.

Some evaluation of materials is an absolute necessity. On the other hand, alternative approaches to instruction do not necessarily require the elaborate evaluation procedures sometimes employed by some major instructional projects. In nearly every case evaluation is very expensive and inconclusive. My experience has been that it would be much better if the evaluation dollar were invested in implementation and teacher training. I know of only a few cases where the evaluation has had much impact on the dissemination or adoption of instructional materials.

Perhaps I should summarize now by looking specifically and sequentially at the questions raised in your communications.

1. How should NIE divide its funds and efforts among the three basic categories of research? Some money should be devoted to each of these categories. However, the implementation, research findings and research based products in the schools should receive the major emphasis.

2. Within the category of development how should NIE divide its funds and efforts among curriculum

development? I would suggest that better methods of teacher-training should receive all or nearly all of the funding of the alternatives mentioned in this category.

3. What types of new curriculum are needed now and which types should be developed by NIE? More emphasis should be placed on the design of materials to fit the characteristics of the students to be served.

4. How much initiative should NIE exert in curriculum improvement activities? Only to stimulate the submission of proposals and the encouragement of individuals who are currently involved in curriculum improvement.

5. How should NIE determine needs and opportunities for new curriculum? This information should come from a diverse source rather than the so-called experts only. The experts should not be included, but mostly their views should be solicited through proposals and funding requests.

6. What should NIE do about actual development of new curricula? Try to stimulate those who are already engaged in curriculum development to continue their efforts and to support new efforts where there is evidence that they ultimately will make some contribution to improvement of instruction.

7. What should NIE do about evaluating any new curricula that develops? Only limited funds should be diverted to evaluation. Evaluation is expensive and has

had little impact on acceptance of the products.

8. What should NIE do about helping schools use new curricula it has produced? Implementation is an area that requires the greatest and most careful consideration by NIE. In great amounts, products already produced are lying on shelves awaiting publicity or funds that will cause them to be used. Much duplication of effort is now occuring in production of new materials. The reinvention of the wheel is utilizing a great deal of the educational dollar with very little return.

9. Who should NIE fund to do the curriculum development activities? Those people who by their track record have shown evidence of competence in this area. It should not be restricted to any particular group or individuals.

10. How should NIE make decisions about procedures and criteria? This question is the most difficult of all. The procedures thus far suggest to me that this aspect of the program is in competent hands. I do not presume to be able to give any advice on this point.